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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 009437

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SUBJECT: INTERIOR MINISTER IGNITES CONTROVERSY OVER
JORDAN'S ELECTION LAW, CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS

REF: AMMAN 7619

Classified By: CDA Christopher Henzel for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (U) Jordan's interior minister had to backpedal after publicly stating that the GOJ will not consider revamping the current election law -- which favors tribal, East Bank communities at the expense of Jordanian-Palestinians citizens -- until the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is resolved. At the same time, he dismayed activists by confirming that the GOJ would not revise its law prohibiting Jordanian women from passing citizenship to their children and non-Jordanian husbands. Habashneh's comments reinforce skeptics' belief that political development will not be a priority for the Fayed government. End Summary.

HABASHNEH: NO NEW ELECTION LAW WHILE I'M IN CHARGE

2. (U) Interior Minister Samir Habashneh provoked loud criticism on November 21 when he stated publicly that the GOJ would not endorse reforming the current election law to more fairly represent Jordanian-Palestinian citizens until the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (and the fate of more than 1.7 million Palestinian refugees resident in Jordan) is settled. "It is not the right time to discuss reallocating electoral districts or removing (parliamentary) quotas," he said. "We must wait until things become clear in Palestine."

3. (C) Habashneh's comments, offered during a conference on political development in Jordan, were not taken well by many participants (including members of the Islamic Action Front), prompting Habashneh on the second day of the conference to clarify that he was only stating his "personal opinion," not GOJ policy. "The government has not backed off from its political development agenda," he said, adding: "the Prime Minister and his team are working together to come up with a political parties and elections law to be presented for deliberation to the public." However, he continued to insist that canceling quotas is not a realistic option at the moment because "society is not politically mature yet." (Note: Contrary to Habashneh's retraction, the Interior Ministry's secretary general told Embassies on November 9 unequivocally

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that the Ministry was satisfied with the current Election Law and had no interest in changing it.)

UNWILLING TO DEAL WITH "SEXIST" LEGISLATION EITHER

4. (U) The Minister further angered many rights activists by telling the conference that the GOJ had no plans to amend the citizenship law that currently prevents women from passing citizenship to their children or their non-Jordanian spouses. "This issue is no longer possible because it means offering the citizenship to around half a million Palestinians in Jordan." He told the conference that there are about 60,000 Jordanian women married to Palestinian men (and around 20,000 Jordanian women married to men of other nationalities). The average number of children in each of these families is around 6.5, "which means giving the Jordanian citizenship to around 500,000 Palestinians," according to Habashneh. He added that to give these people citizenship means Jordan would be settling half a million refugees in Jordan "in contradiction with Jordan's stand on the right of return for Palestinians."

5. (U) When asked by a reporter about the privilege that Jordanian men enjoy in passing citizenship to their Palestinian wives and children, Habashneh said: "The Jordanian Citizenship Law is a sexist piece of legislation." However, he said the government is "seriously considering" offering citizenship to children of divorced, widowed or abandoned Jordanian women who are married to non-Jordanians "for humanitarian reasons."

6. (C) Women's rights activists are outraged. Eva Abu Halaweh, executive director of the human rights and legal aid

organization Mizan, says Habashneh's comments are a significant step backwards on an important issue, long advocated by Jordanian women's groups, and endorsed by Queen Rania (who is herself of Palestinian origin). Jordanian National Commission for Women Secretary General Amal Sabbagh says Habashneh's statements directly contradict Prime Minister Fayez's public commitment earlier this year promising to reconsider the issue. Jordanian Women's Union President Amneh Zu'bi, whose organization provides legal aid to needy women, says "most of the tough cases we have been handling are those of Jordanian women married to Palestinians who suffer from various burdens because they do not enjoy their full rights." She notes that these families suffer many hardships: they must pay large fees for visas and residency permits for their children and husbands. They also are forced to travel between police stations and health clinics annually to obtain security clearances and medical reports for their "foreign" children.

COMMENT

17. (C) Habashneh took controversial public positions on unlicensed preachers in September (reftel) only to make an embarrassing public climb-down within days. Some may dismiss this week's episode as mere clumsiness. However, to disillusioned advocates of political reform in Jordan, Habashneh's statements confirmed what critics had suspected for months: despite its public promises to revamp these controversial laws, in reality, the Fayez government is not willing to take any steps that might begin to undermine East Bankers' political ascendancy. The fray also underscores how the ostensibly regional Israeli-Palestinian conflict has decidedly domestic implications for Jordan's political and social development.

18. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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HENZEL